

THE NEW YORK COLONISTS.

BY H. T. TUCKERMAN.

THE claims of the Pilgrims have been more than vindicated. The anniversary of their landing is widely celebrated. New England has produced more writers than all other sections of the country, and her annals have been recorded with a particularity which leaves little for the future antiquarian to discover. Scarcely one of her villages but can boast its historian. The Yankees are proverbially shrewd observers and industrious chroniclers; and the many beautiful tributes pronounced at Plymouth, and before local societies dedicated to the memory of the Puritans, seem pledges that oblivion will not soon cast its relentless wave over New England's early story. It is otherwise with New York. Her colonial history, prior to the Revolution, is comparatively barren of events. Let not this make us unmindful of its claims. Gibbon, in his "Roman Empire," in briefly passing over the reign of some prince, acknowledges that the less there is for history to record, the happier for mankind. The original settlers of New York came not to plant creeds, but to find homes. No fierce war of opinion kept society in a ferment. They professed no grand moral enterprise. They were honest, but unambitious men. To live unmolested, to enjoy the comforts of life in peace, was all they sought. Let us not on this account condemn them. Let us acknowledge the honest manliness that made them so prize "the glorious privilege of being independent," and the bravery with which they met all the hardships of uncivilized life, to leave their children free and happy firesides. Although they had no poet, let us not suffer their memories to die.

The few pictures of Dutch life that have come down to us, are far from unattractive. Some delightful sketches, published many years since in England, furnish a charming outline, which imagination readily fills out, of the simple manners and native integrity by which the early colonists fashioned their lives.* It is remarkable, that the only popular picture of these times and people should be a caricature; nor must we be surprised that "Knickerbocker's New York" should be quoted in Europe as a veritable history, until some serious effort is made to redeem the fame and brighten the dirty but untarnished escutcheon of these honest Dutch. It is difficult to account for their comparative misappreciation. We always fancy a Dutchman as a corpulent, sleepy fellow, with a pipe in his mouth. Yet is there not an enviable wisdom in their tranquil philosophy? It is true, that in the

march of mind they were "dragged along in the procession," but if rational enjoyment and a contented spirit be any test of character, they may claim no inferior rank among the nations. Consider their history. For more than a century learning, science and philosophy, found their sole refuge in the free states of Holland. Recall the bravery with which they resisted their Spanish invaders; the enterprise that so long made their ships the carriers of all Europe; the patient industry which constructed those immense dykes that render Holland one of the most remarkable of countries; the genius exhibited in their school of painting—no inadequate illustration of their national character—which triumphs in a humble sphere, and, if it create not the Madonnas of Raphael or the angels of Corregio, makes the canvas glow with many a scene of homely festivity, and invests the most common-place objects with a picturesque charm.

There are few objects in this country which convey to my mind so significant an idea of comfort as an old Dutch dwelling. Its ample portico alone seems an emblem of hospitality; and I cannot but sympathise with the murmurs of the few old inhabitants of Rockland county, who so reluctantly yield up their ancient landmarks to the devouring locomotive. The hunting and trading excursions of the early colonists made them as hardy in the field as they were contented in their homes, so that it was a proverb, during the Revolution, that a well armed body of New York provincials had nothing to fear but an ague or an ambush. Cheap literature was unknown in those days, but when Colonel Schuyler brought from England "Paradise Lost" and the "Spectator," every intelligent person in the colony made them a study for years. The influx of other than the original settlers, such as the French Protestants, induced liberality of feeling; and their equal condition kept at bay that "unconquered devil—ambition," which lays waste so large a portion of modern dignity and happiness. The very pride of opinion that the Puritans cherish, would have been a pernicious element in the American character, had it not been modified by the less intellectual but more genial characteristics of the New York colonists. If the New Englander represented the great principle of reform, the Manhattanese embodied the no less grand principle of conservatism. If the New England character furnished the sails when our ship of state was launched, the Dutch emigrants were the ballast that kept her in trim. If in New York there was less obvious religious zeal than in Massachusetts, there was less

* Mrs. Grant's "Memoirs of an American Lady."

also of bigotry; if there was less enterprise, there was more contentment; less of public spirit, there was more personal independence. If the school-master was not abroad, the bitterest fruits of the tree of knowledge remained unplucked. If no marble banks adorned their streets, well-stocked barns gave assurance of wealth no less substantial.

If the even tenor of life yielded few striking points to the annalists, the peace that reigned in every bosom put to shame the bloody tales of history; and if poetry found little to celebrate, existence itself was like an acted poem, gliding onward in beautiful tranquillity.

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